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Laos

"The temples are public, and they who have no family home are entitled to sleep in them, while upon week days the people come to make offerings of flowers, and perform libations with water, listening to the advice given them by the priests, while the women tell their beads, and signify that they have got through them by blowing through a sea shell."

A DRAGON APPARENT

241 sufficient for his requirements. If there are six members of the
461 family, six standard, equal sized portions of land will be cultivated.
511 If a child is born into the family another piece of land is cleared and
792 worked. When a member of the family dies, whether it be a baby
or the grandfather, cultivation of his portion will be stopped.
Just enough is produced for the family to eat and to provide
a small surplus sold in the market — *with the bonze's approval* — to
buy occasional strict necessities, like a silk shawl and a bicycle for the
735 daughter. There is no social insurance and there are no poor. The
556 old and the sick are supported by the young, or, where they are
792 left without able-bodied providers, by the community, and the
771 bonzes give instructions for the necessary land to be placed under
cultivation for them. The accumulation of wealth which is not to
be used for definite, approved purposes, causes a man to lose
prestige among his neighbours, just, as in the West, the process is
reversed. The main difference, it seems, between Buddhism in
Indo-China, and Christianity — apart from any question as to their
relative merits — is that, whether we admire it or not, the former is
largely put into practice.

It is a stimulating reflection that the Western millionaire, ob-
sessed for the sake of social distinction with the amassing of enor-
mous possessions — little of which he can personally consume —
would attain the same ends of personal celebrity under a Laotian
Buddhistic order of things by his priestly austerities — by embracing
the most abject and prestige-conferring form of poverty.

181 For this reason perhaps the local Evangelist missionary and his
771 wife have made no converts. Like all who have lived among the
785 Laotians they are charmed with them — although, of course,
797 disappointed at their blindness. They also deplore their im-
morality.

In the matter of converts the Evangelists have been no more
unsuccessful than their Portuguese, Spanish and French forerunners.
The Laotians having little capacity for abstractions, either in their

346 Pagodas are always built on ground which has been perfectly leveled, is quite extensive and is surrounded by a wooden palisade or brick wall of elbow height.

[485] Within the pagoda enclosures there are bonzeries and dependent structures to serve as quarters for the bonzes, schools for their pupils and hostleries for travelers.

735 The construction and upkeep of pagodas are entirely dependent on the generous liberality of the faithful. Thus these edifices can be used as a criterion for discovering both the state of prosperity of a region and the religious faith of its inhabitants.

346 [778] As used to be the case for our churches, Laotian pagodas and even their enclosures are, according to the customs of the land, sanctuaries which confer immunity against legal prosecution for certain crimes and misdemeanors.

[521] It is also in the enclosure and sometimes under the cloisters and verandas of the pagodas that the inhabitants gather on the legal holidays, and also private holidays, which are known as "Ngans".

844 Childbirth. Dr. Estrade describes the delivery of a woman of southern Laos as follows. The preliminaries, the operation itself and post-delivery procedure are the same, with only slight differences in detail, in northern Laos, and we may therefore quote Dr. Estrade's description as applicable to all of Laos in general.

777 [782] "Childbirth never takes place in the house inhabited by the pregnant woman or her direct relatives, but always in the home of a neighbor or distant relative who gives hospitality to the patient until she is up and about again. The duration of pregnancy is counted in moons, as in all calculations of time, the moon being the essential element for the Laotian in the measurement of time and the occurrence of a great many phenomena. When a woman reaches the last moon of her pregnancy she takes certain precautions all tending to delay delivery until the first phase of the new moon, since births during the last phases are signs of misfortune [189] such as the death of the child, deformity, etc. These prejudices have such force that parents are careless in caring for any child born during the last phases of the moon, and in such a case all of their effort goes into prayers, offerings to the bonzes and the making of votive offerings (1)

(1) This assertion should not, however, be taken too literally or in any general sense. This is a prejudice which is kept up by the bonzes in their own self-interest, and is easy to see through. (Author's note.)

flowers, pompoms and multicolored cotton streamers. Thick wax candles are stuck to the uprights, into which coins, gold nuggets, gold leaf and precious stones are sunk.

The wax is destined for worship purposes and the other offerings will be used for the upkeep of pagodas or for ornamenting sacred statues. The bonzes are not forgotten, for on the platform of the "Pha-Sate," either between the uprights or in special baskets ad hoc, there are articles of clothing, bedclothes, kettles, talaps, betel accessories, etc.

The day preceding the delivery of the "Tone-Pheung" to the pagoda is spent in making all kinds of preparations--cooking food, making betel quids, cigarettes, cakes and other necessary items [223] for the morrow's celebration. In the evening there is a kind of rehearsal for the "Ngan" in which the singers and musicians practice until an extremely late hour while the mothers and married women continue to work in the presence of the young men and girls talking merrily.

On the morning of the day when the "Tone-Pheung" is to be presented to the pagoda the bonzes are invited to a copious feast which continues long after their departure among relatives, friends and neighbors. The bonzes come back in the afternoon to bless the "Tone-Pheung" and to say certain prayers. Then, towards five in the afternoon, the procession forms and five or six bearers, depending on the weight, take the stretcher supporting the offering and raise it to their shoulders. The men follow first after the procession, and then the women, and the latter carry lighted wax candles in their hands. Musicians bring up the rear, and the whole crowd moves toward the pagoda by the longest route. There the "Pha-Sate" or the "Tone-Pheung" is taken around the enclosure three times and finally put down at the entrance to the pagoda. Those present place their candles in a special holder at the foot of the great statue of Buddha, and then withdraw while the bonzes recite prayers in the presence of whoever is making the offering and his relatives.

The guests then return to the home of their host, where the celebration goes on all night and sometimes even lasts into the following day.

The bonzes remove the wax from the "Pha-Sate" and use it to make candles for worship purposes. The flowers are placed at the feet of Buddha, and the coins and precious stones are put aside.

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He¹ must never look at a woman. However a few old women are seen in the pagoda. These are the devotees. They are dressed in white, their heads are completely shaved, and they lead a life of observance and asceticism which is as rigorous as that of the monks. They render small services to the bonzes, decorate the altar, etc., but they live outside the enclosure of the pagoda.

Laotian Buddhism.

In a recent pamphlet, His Excellency Thao Nhouy Abhay, former Minister of National Culture and Education, wrote: "In its intrinsic substance Buddhism is deeply tolerant, but ours [26] has truly become not austere enough." Therefore he proposes some necessary reforms which would quickly raise the intellectual and moral level of the bonzes in Laos. There are two sects in Laos: the Mahanikay and the Thammayut. The only difference between the two is the way in which they consider that monastic rule should be observed. Nothing distinguishes them in appearance except the color of the monastic robe of the Mahanikay, which is brownish-ochre almost chestnut. The king is the chief of the Buddhist clergy. As for the believer who regularly observes his religious duties, he is satisfied with little and gives much in alms. Buddhist tales and particularly Laotian texts, among them the Pannasajataka (Ha Sip Xat), quote all the merits acquired for future lives by those who give alms and, above all, feed the bonzes.

Religious Literature.

The basis of the religious literature of Laos is the Buddhist Tripitaka. These "Three Baskets" contain the integral "word of the Buddha."

The basket [corbeille] of Vinaya (Vinayapitaka) is the rule of monastic life. It consists of five sections: Patimokkha, Mahavagga, Coullavagga, Souttavibhanga and Parivara. The Patimokkha is meant to be read in public (particularly on the feasts of the eighth month), on the periodic days of confession. The Mahavagga and the Coullavagga give the list of daily obligations, illustrated by examples drawn from the life of the Buddha. The Souttavibhanga is really a commentary on the Patimokkha; finally the Parivara is both a revision and a catechism.

The Basket of the Soutta (Souttapitaka) contains an enormous amount of preaching and of edifying tales. Among others, the famous Dhammapada, a treasury of the sayings of the Buddha and the Jatakas are to be found in this basket.

[27] The third basket is that of Abhidharma and consists of seven

1 [i.e., a bonze -- Analyst]

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1. To have had carnal relations with anyone, even an animal.

2. To have stolen the property of others.

3. To have killed.

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4. To have falsely usurped spiritual perfections, and with the intention of personal profit.

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Then follows a list of lesser sins. When the enumeration is completed, the reader addresses the monks, repeating three times the following question:

"Now, I ask the reverend ones: Are you free of these sins? And for the second time: Are you pure? And for the third time I ask: Are you pure?" If everyone is silent, the reader says: "The reverend Ones are free of these sins, therefore they are silent, that is how I understand it."

In this way are catalogued in more than two hundred paragraphs, without much order, the precepts dealing with the daily life of the monks, their housing, their food and drink. No detail however irrelevant or insignificant is omitted.

In Laos as in Cambodia "during the entire rainy season, a taper of the Vassa must burn in each pagoda. This consists of a more or less richly carved, painted, wooden cylinder into which is poured virgin wax around a wick" (E. Porée-Maspéro). Before going into retreat, the bonzes are given garments, then the people form a procession and enter the pagodas where they deposit their taper.

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[43] Ho Khao Padap Dinh--the Feast of the Dead of the Ninth Month

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This feast is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the waning moon of the ninth month and is accompanied by offerings to the bonzes.

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A Jataka (Sadhitisaraja) taken from the Ha Sip Xat tells us the benefits acquired by celebrating this feast.

"Two poor devout Buddhist woodcutters sold the produce of their labor and bought two large urns. Into them they put some rice, a few pieces of sugar cane, two bowls, four bananas, some meat and fish, and some delicacies. They offered all this to a bonze on the day of the feast of the dead and vowed to be born again in a better state. As a result of this act of charity they were born again into a royal family. The husband became king and his wife queen. The Buddha then said to those who were listening to this story: "When an act of charity is done for the feast of the dead, one attains three blisses: the terrestrial bliss of being king, the celestial bliss of becoming Indra and finally the supreme bliss of Nirvana,"

Ho Khao Slak--The Feast of the Tenth Month.

This feast is similar to that taking place in Cambodia at the same period. Offerings are made to the bonzes by casting lots. The name of the bonze is written on small tickets which are mixed up in a cup. Each donor offers his present to the monk whose name he has drawn.

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The Feasts of the Eleventh Month.

The Buddhist Lent finishes on the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the eleventh month. In each pagoda the bonzes recite the Patimokkha, then confess their sins before leaving the [44] community to go either on a pilgrimage or into a rustic retreat for the period of the dry season.

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The Offering of Kanthin. During this feast the ceremony of Kanthin takes place. This consists in offering to the bonzes garments, bedding, etc....

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"When the Buddha was in the Jetavana at Savatthi, some monks came to find him. They were caught by the beginning of Lent and were obliged to stop on their way. When they set out again after the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the eleventh month, they arrived covered with mud. The Buddha therefore authorized them to accept the gift of garments at the end of Lent."

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The Kanthin can only be accepted by a group of at least five bonzes, but the material may not be borrowed of a third or offered on demand. Those who receive a Kanthin must sew its pieces themselves. (Cf. the Laotian bonze).

The Feast of the Waters.

Other feasts correspond to these purely Buddhist ones. The day before the race of the dugouts the faithful throw into the river small illuminated boats of bamboo or banana wood. Originally lamps were used, consisting of a piece of string dipped in oil, and held up by a banana leaf. This cord was woven at one end in the shape of crows' feet, in memory of the Jataka of the "White Crow."

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"A female crow had made its nest at the top of a tree. On the night of a storm the bird died, and its five eggs were carried away by the current. They were gathered by five animals, a hen, an otter, a turtle, a cow, a serpent and gave birth to five buddhas. These buddhas often thought [45] of their mother who was in the heaven of the Tavatimsa. She came down to earth in the form of